Chairman Shows Some Independence

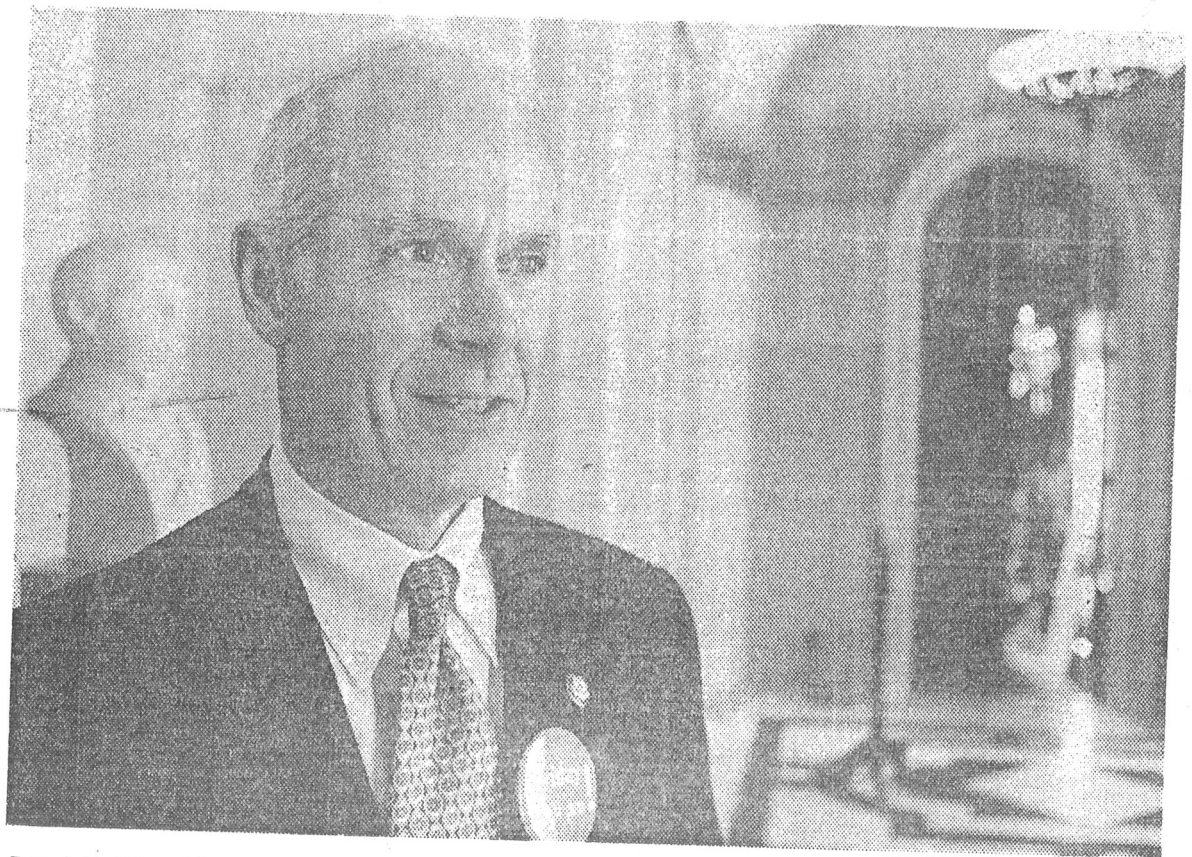
Porter's Votes Cross The GOP Hard Line

By Dan Morgan
Washington Post Staff Writer

"Mr. Porter votes no."

So went the mantra one day last month as the clerk of the House Appropriations Committee called for votes on a series of conservative-backed amendments to a $60 billion bill funding labor, education and health programs begining Oct. 1.

It was a preview of the unusual situation on the House floor this week, in which Rep. John Edward Porter (R-Ill.), chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that drew up the bill and the man in



BY LUCIAN PERKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Rep. John Edward Porter (R-Ill.) chairs the Appropriations subcommittee drawing up the big domestic spending bill. A colleague says Porter is not combative by nature. "He won't be bullied or pressured by party leaders."

charge of guiding it to final passage, opposed key provisions of the measure.

Those who know Porter and his district say his seemingly contradictory actions amount to smart politics in the affluent suburbs he represents on Chicago's North Shore. It also provides a glimpse of the grass-roots politics emerging in House GOP ranks. For Porter, and several dozen other Republicans who represent suburbs, support of abortion rights, gun control and environmental regulation is a political necessity, and it is why political observers believe there is no easy way to bridge the gap between the suburban Republicans and the new breed of harder-edged, ideological members of the GOP.

Porter, trim and vigorous at 60, drew applause on both sides of the aisle Wednesday night when he spoke out for restoring the government's family planning program, which had been eliminated in committee by antiabortion forces. The subcommittee chairman got his wish.

During debate yesterday, Porter continued to oppose curbs on federal research on human embryos, limits on political advocacy by nonprofit organizations and the lifting of a requirement that states provide Medicaid abortions for victims of rape and incest.

In his subcommittee, Porter was the sole Republican voting against a conservative-backed proposal to cut 30 percent from the budget of the National Labor Relations Board, and against several provisions curbing NLRB powers.

Porter hardly seems cut out for the role of dissenter. Elected to Congress in 1980, he gained a reputation as a hard-working, straight-arrow member of the minority on the Appropriations Committee.

In the committee's private counsels, Porter argued for more spending on education, health programs, impact aid for schools served by the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, and his favorite government enterprise, the National Institutes of Health. Basic research by NIH, one of the few institutions that under his bill would receive more funds than it did last year, is helpful to the biotech and pharmaceutical companies clustered in his district, including Abbott Laboratories, Baxter International, and G.D. Searle.

But Democrats noticed that Porter supported across-the-board cuts in appropriations measures when his vote was being publicly recorded on the House floor.

"I've always been for deficit reduction," said Porter, whose fiscal conservatism has been singled out for recognition by the Concord Coalition and the Grace Commission's Citizens Against Government Waste, which named him a "taxpayer superhero."

Thrust into the chairmanship of the subcommittee after last fall's GOP victory, Porter became House Speaker Newt Gingrich's loyal lieutenant in cutting Great Society and Clinton administration social programs.

At the same time, the leadership packed his subcommittee with junior members with a hard-line conservative bent.

When the conservatives began loading up his bill with provisions curbing enforcement of labor and job safety laws, and antiabortion provisions, Porter was unable to stop them. But he did not hide his disgust. "I'm very uncomfortable, as an appropriator, putting in all this . . . language," Porter said Wednesday. "Whole pieces of legislation are being [inserted] without hearings."

In many ways, Porter is a throwback to a less partisan, pre-Gingrich era in the House. GOP radicals refer to the older, less partisan guard as "bed wetters" from the bygone days of country club Republicans.

"John is not happy with the combative climate in Congress," with people scoring political points. He'd rather look for solutions," said an associate. But he added: "He won't be bullied or pressured by party leaders.

Porter's independent streak emerged long before the House Republican leadership's move to the right. He supported the ban on assault weapons in 1994, and earlier this year he opposed three provisions of the "Contract With America": term limits, the tax cut package and a version of the balanced budget amendment that would have required a supermajority vote to raise taxes.

Even on some fiscal issues Porter refused to toe the conservative line, as was evident in his refusal to support an immediate end to federal support for public broadcasting.

Independence has had its costs.

In 1992 and 1994, he was forced to defend his seat against a primary challenge from conservative Kathleen Sullivan, an ally of Eagle Forum leader Phyllis Schlafly, and founder of Project Respect, a high school program counseling sexual abstinence.

Aides expect another conservative challenge in 1996.

"He's done as good a job as he could given the position he's been put in," said Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (Md.), a Democrat on Porter's subcommittee. "He's stood up for his principles."